Identification and return of a skull from Tasmania in the Berlin anatomical collection

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With 4 figures

Abstract: Following a request by the Australian government, human remains of Australian origin were identified in the anatomical collection of Charité, the medical faculty of Berlin. We initiated an interdisciplinary provenance research on such remains to ensure their identity, elucidate their history, and prepare for a possible return to Australia. Here, we present results regarding a skull in the collection labeled as stemming from Tasmania. The non-invasive anthropological investigation revealed the skull to stem from a girl of about 15 years of age who most likely died of a massive otitis/petrositis with subsequent meningitis. These results match the historical findings, which started from an inscription on the frontal bone giving a first name (“Nanny”), an ancestry (“native of Kangaroo Island”), a collector (“Schayer”), and a location (“van Diemensland”, i.e. Tasmania). The collector, Adolph Schayer, was a German sheep breeder and botanical/zoological collector living in north-western Tasmania from 1831 to 1843. In archival sources, a girl named Nanny Allan could be identified, who was a native of Kangaroo Island and died in Launceston/Tasmania in 1836 at the age of about 14 years. As there were no doubts that these remains stem from a Tasmanian individual, they were handed over to representatives of the Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre in July 2014.

Keywords: provenance research; historical anthropological collections; Tasmania; repatriation

1 Introduction

In 2008, following a request by the Australian government, Charité promised to return human remains of Australian origin. These were part of anthropological collections of skulls and skeletons from all over the world, which had mainly been acquired during German colonial times (from the 1880s to 1918). In response to these and similar requests, the Charité Human Remains Project was initiated in 2010 and received funding from the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft for three years (grant nos.WI3697/1–1 and 1–2) to enable interdisciplinary research into the provenance of certain parts of the collections and their specific colonial past (Koel-Abt & Winkelmann 2013; Stoecker et al. 2013). This also comprised one skull labelled as stemming from Tasmania in the anatomical collection, the collection of the former Institute of Anatomy of Berlin’s Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität. The successor institute is now part of Charité, the medical faculty of Berlin (Winkelmann 2013). The research related to this case that we present here could confirm the origin from Tasmania with sufficient certainty. This eventually led to its handover to a delegation of the Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre (TAC) on 25 July 2014 in Berlin.

1.1 Tasmanian history

As most readers will not be familiar with details of Tasmanian history, it will be summarised here shortly (following Plomley 1987; Taylor 2002; Ryan 2012). Indigenous Tasmanians are thought to have lived in the area for 35,000 years and were separated from mainland Australia by the flooding of Bass Strait around 12,000 years ago. After occasional European contact from the 17th century onwards, British settlement, mainly by convicts, began in 1802. Until 1856, today’s Tasmania was referred to as Van Diemen’s Land. Colonial settlers started to displace and suppress the indigenous population, culminating in the “Black War”, a period of violent fights between settlers and Aborigines that began around 1824 and had its peak around 1830. In their quest for land, most colonists, including the Governor of Tasmania, aimed at an extermination of the Aborigines or their removal from mainland Tasmania. In 1829, George Augustus Robinson (1788–1866) was made a “conciliator” between settlers...